

APPENDIX A

HIGHLIGHTS OF COMMUNITY MEETINGS WESTFORD COMPREHENSIVE MASTER PLAN

The Westford Planning Board and Comprehensive Master Plan Committee (CMPC) sponsored a series of public meetings for the Comprehensive Plan. Community-wide meetings were held at night on November 9, 2006, and November 16, 2006, and during the day on November 15, 2006. They were publicized in the local newspaper, posted at town hall, and announced in other venues. In addition, the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG) conducted a special daytime meeting for local businesses, the Westford Business Forum, on November 14, 2006.

Several common themes surfaced during the public meeting series. For example, people seem to agree that Westford's key strengths include its peaceful quality, rural character, protected open spaces, an extensive trail network, and preserved historic villages and neighborhoods. Many speakers said Westford is a family-friendly community with an excellent school system and strong cultural institutions. They expressed pride in Westford's community spirit and culture of volunteerism. In contrast, participants in the public meetings described Westford's weaknesses as its high cost of housing, lack of affordable housing and starter homes, and the impacts of growth on the town's open space and rural character. In both the community-wide and neighborhood meetings (Appendix B), many people cited Westford's lack of sidewalks and increasing traffic as significant weaknesses, too.

Participants saw opportunities for Westford in its rich history and existing plans and studies, which provide a framework for the town to be more proactive in guiding new development. In various ways, all of the threats that residents identified relate to Westford's potential for continued growth. They said that if growth is not controlled, Westford would lose its remaining open space and have overcrowded schools, negative impacts on the public water supply, traffic impacts on public safety and quality of life, and higher taxes. They also said Westford would become even more unaffordable and more vulnerable to Chapter 40B developments.

Community Meeting #1

Stony Brook School

November 9, 2006

Attendees at this meeting participated in a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis. The results are as follows:

Westford's Strengths:

- Open space
- Library
- Peaceful and stable community
- Commitment to preserving open space
- Volunteerism/community spirit
- The five villages
- Town center
- Sense of Community
- Trail system
- Accessibility to town government & open town meeting

Westford's Weaknesses:

- Loss of open space - due to 40B density
- Lack of local initiative in affordable housing
- Poor follow-up on prior Master Plan
- Out of control growth - largely due to 40B's
- Lack of sidewalks
- Housing prices - high cost of "entry"
- Affordability of taxes
- Inefficient spending of tax revenue
- Elderly housing issues: high cost of municipal services and lack of diversity

Opportunities

- Stronger leadership needed
- Sustainable development
- Improve implementation of existing plans, e.g. master plan, sidewalk plan, recreation plan, etc.
- Implement housing plan
- Proactive approach to future development

Threats to Westford's strengths

- Lack of resources to buy remaining open space
- Overcrowding of school due to growth
- Water supply impacts of future development (and water quality)
- Lack of vision for the future

- Highway access impacts - traffic and litter. Character of Route 110 bus

Threats that could exacerbate Westford's weaknesses

- Vulnerability of the community to 40B developments
- Traffic
- Ballooning taxes, increasing unaffordability of the town
- Incomplete understanding and awareness about Smart Growth
- Encroachment of urban conditions affecting town, e.g., crime and growth

Community Meeting #2

Rogers Fire Station

November 15, 2006

This meeting was held during daytime hours. Much like the first meeting on November 9, the daytime meeting at Rogers Fire Station was organized as a SWOT analysis.

Strengths

- Friendly community, particularly family friendly
- Rural character-yet close to the city
- Safe
- Trail systems
- Open spaces
- Schools
- Sense of community
- Neighborhood groups
- Recreational areas (beaches)
- Strong town government
- Readily accessible, lakes and pond are accessible
- Progressive with affordable housing master plan
- Zoning-dealing with problems
- Roudenbush Community Center and Parish Center of the Arts
- Community traditions

Weaknesses

- Taxes
- Cost of housing
- Lack of affordable housing and lack of starter homes/apartments
- Sense of isolation-need to travel everywhere for services, particularly difficult for seniors
- Lack of sidewalks-especially connecting schools
- More parking needed in town common
- Shortage of pavilions in parks where people can picnic
- Too rapid growth-losing rural nature
- No facility for outside entertainment

Opportunities

- Sidewalks to link neighborhoods/schools
- Make better use of town common [i.e. town should buy house(s) around common for some town uses/more businesses (coffee café/book store)]
- More parking-make more like Lexington/Concord
- Preserve history
- Promote/protect small businesses

Threats

- Uncontrolled growth
- Development not following the master plan
- Traffic (both in terms of safety & quality of life)
- Form of government-representative government
- Loss of rural character/open space

Community Meeting #3

Stony Brook School

November 16, 2006

Attendees were divided into six breakout groups to answer a series of questions about an assigned topic. The topics included housing; environment; employment, goods & services; transportation; community character; and public facilities. Each group was given the same series of questions.

Municipal Services/Town Governance

Attendees were asked for their comments on Westford's municipal services and town governance. Many expressed concerns that maintaining town government in Westford is challenging, noting the difficulty in achieving public participation including town meeting, which many felt was difficult to understand and was often inconsistent. Other comments included:

- Difficulty in managing so many volunteer committees
- Lack of implementation of past planning studies
- Communication between boards is often disjointed with little information sharing
- Lack of a town newspaper as an information-sharing source

Housing

1. The Situation today is....

- Hard to get in/ hard to stay in
- Expensive/ taxes go up
- Need for less expensive housing/ diversified housing
- Grown without plan
- Lack of foresight and planning
- Pennywise/ pound foolish
- 40B struggle/ takes matters out of residents hands
- Market over-priced
- Concern about water supply
- Not enough elderly housing
- Does not facilitate mixed types of housing
- Need for affordable housing

2. In 10 years, we would want to describe the situation this way...

- Diversity of housing for all income levels
- Housing influenced by other factors
 - Environment
 - Water
- Evolved villages
- Housing tied to services
- Develop housing near services

- Reuse options considered, explored, to implement
3. Change could help to make Westford an even better place by...
- No Answer
4. Whop has a stake in the situation we envision for Westford 10 yeas from now?
- No Answer
5. Westford may need some help to assure that the process of change gets us where we want to be in 10 years from now. What partners does the town need?
- Partnering with other towns
 - Federal, state, regional grants to improve
6. If we could take only one step to promote positive change, we would...
- Town owns a lot of land
 - Reports suggest development that allows seniors, young people to stay and buy in town
 - Stricter limits
7. If Westford promoted or accommodated change in this area (housing) it might help to meet other valid planning needs such as.....
- No Answer

Environment

1. The Situation today is....
- Beautiful and diverse environment
 - Lots of development
 - Conflict – open space- development
 - Wildlife – 1/3 rare and endangered species
 - Water: supply, quality, recreational
 - Granite Quarry
 - Natural resources: Rocks
 - Views: Bear Hill, Westford
 - Topography
 - Some protected
 - Disappearing agriculture
 - Hill Orchard
 - Lakes and ponds – town beaches
 - Open space: 3000 acres protected; unprotected near 3000 acres
 - Air Quality: good
 - Town Center vs. Route 110 corridor
 - Traffic/ air pollution

- Vernal pools
2. In 10 years, we would want to describe the situation this way...
- More protected open space
 - Adequate high quality water resources
 - Wildlife protected
 - Adapted homes (open space)
3. Change could help to make Westford an even better place by...
- No Answer
4. Who has a stake in the situation we envision for Westford 10 years from now?
- All at stake
5. Westford may need some help to assure that the process of change gets us where we want to be in 10 years from now. What partners does the town need?
- No Answer
6. If we could take only one step to promote positive change, we would...
- Well developed, approved and enforced Master Plan that protects and preserves the environment for the people.
 - Wildlife
 - Lakes, ponds/pools
 - Streams
 - Air
 - Water
7. If Westford promoted or accommodated change in this area (housing) it might help to meet other valid planning needs such as.....
- No answer
- Other:
- Curbside recycling
 - Pay for leaf pick-up
 - Restoring of historic properties
 - Streams

Employment, Goods & Services/ Business Development

1. The Situation today is....
- Town is the biggest employer
 - No economic development group (advisory/ planning)
 - No outreach to potential new businesses (e.g., assessor)

- No Chamber of Commerce
 - Don't use TIF
 - Some anti-big business feeling
 - 1M square feet empty space (+ 1.5M approved and un-built)
 - No design guidance for new businesses
2. In 10 years, we would want to describe the situation this way...
- Good corporate citizens
 - Help increase tax base (1995 goal: 20-25 percent)
 - More affordable housing
 - Support services for businesses (more daycare)
 - Traffic management (cooperation among businesses)
 - Tune zoning to encourage desired businesses into desired locations (e.g. Mixed uses)
 - Businesses: friendly attitudes (streamlined permitting)
3. Change could help to make Westford an even better place by...
- No answer
4. Whop has a stake in the situation we envision for Westford 10 yeas from now?
- No answer
5. Westford may need some help to assure that the process of change gets us where we want to be in 10 years from now. What partners does the town need?
- No answer
6. If we could take only one step to promote positive change, we would...
- Establish and maintain relationship with business community
7. If Westford promoted or accommodated change in this area (housing) it might help to meet other valid planning needs such as.....
- No Answer

Transportation

1. The Situation today is....
- Rt. 495 – shortcut for NH drives
 - Only 3 points to cross north/south
 - Large housing clusters generate large amounts of vehicular traffic
 - Road systems have not changed to accommodate larger numbers of drivers
 - Sporadic sidewalks
 - No public transportation
 - Roads: review complicated/ unusual/ obstructed view intersections

2. In 10 years, we would want to describe the situation this way...
 - Bus and trains: MBTA bus line spur to Littleton commuter rail (would require parking lot)
 - Inter Westford shuttle bus
 - Lowell bus lines extended to Route 110 area businesses
 - Shuttle to service library
 - 110 will be (most likely) 4 lanes
3. Change could help to make Westford an even better place by...
 - No Answer
4. Who has a stake in the situation we envision for Westford 10 years from now?
 - No Answer
5. Westford may need some help to assure that the process of change gets us where we want to be in 10 years from now. What partners does the town need?
 - No Answer
6. If we could take only one step to promote positive change, we would...
 - No Answer
7. If Westford promoted or accommodated change in this area (housing) it might help to meet other valid planning needs such as.....
 - No Answer

Community Character/Sense of Place

1. The Situation today is....
 - Suburb
 - Bedroom town
 - Rural
 - Still maintains open space, trees, long rolling roads, stone walls, town center
 - Villages have neighborliness
 - Some areas of town have no character, Route 110
2. In 10 years, we would want to describe the situation this way...
 - Maintain character
 - Rural perception
3. Change could help to make Westford an even better place by...
 - List some ways that change could benefit the town/the region
 - A. Protect town center and village center and add retail and meeting spaces in appropriate scale and vocabulary

B. Keeping quality as amenity to region vocabulary of traditional New England

4. Who has a stake in the situation we envision for Westford 10 years from now?
 - Seniors, new comers, children... All
 - The right kind of businesses and developers
 - Master Plan needs to be used to guide community character, i.e., traffic calming, parking lots, and signage
5. Westford may need some help to assure that the process of change gets us where we want to be in 10 years from now. What partners does the town need?
 - Strong community organizations
 - Enlightened developers
 - Designers
6. If we could take only one step to promote positive change, we would...
 - Design Advisory Committee to formalize design guidelines to impact regulatory process.
7. If Westford promoted or accommodated change in this area (community character/sense of place) it might help to meet other valid planning needs such as.....
 - Mixed use on Route 110
 - Villages- compact forms

Public Facilities/ Public Amenities

1. The Situation today is....
 - Over crowded town hall
 - Not enough meeting space (need to prioritize)
 - Public meeting space- informal groups (mother's groups)
 - Emergency services: need to evaluate, plan for future staffing, etc.
 - Staffing: professional vs. volunteer
 - Sports fields: seems to be ok now because have worked on increasing; well distributed in town
 - Are any under utilized?
 - Schools are excellent
 - Sidewalks: Many streets where you have to drive
 - Scenic narrow roads: hard for bikes, people, parking
 - Beaches: good
 - No town-wide sewer system: parts of town need them, storm water problems
2. In 10 years, we would want to describe the situation this way...
 - More sidewalks/ "trails" (pedestrian friendly)
 - Bike lanes

- Emergency services
 - Training staff- volunteer or professional
 - Expand Senior Center
 - Sewers: Town wide: no; localized: yes/maybe
3. Change could help to make Westford an even better place by...
- Fire Station south of 495
 - Better town hall: centralized location, "one-stop shopping for town departments
 - Public utilities: power outages: fix so not so often/ higher amps in Forge Village
4. Whop has a stake in the situation we envision for Westford 10 yeas from now?
- Residents
 - Young residents
 - "some agents of change don't have a stake (e.g.: developers)
 - Businesses (local service. Now= bias against them)
5. Westford may need some help to assure that the process of change gets us where we want to be in 10 years from now. What partners does the town need?
- State
 - Businesses
 - Developers
 - Elected officials (town, state...)
6. If we could take only one step to promote positive change, we would...
- Give plans/reports teeth
 - Implements the plans
7. If Westford promoted or accommodated change in this area (community character/sense of place) it might help to meet other valid planning needs such as.....
- Employment
 - Character
 - Housing
 - All other topics

Westford Business Forum

J.V. Fletcher Library

November 14, 2006

NMCOG conducted the Westford Business Forum in order to assure that Westford's business establishments had opportunities to participate in the Comprehensive Plan process. NMCOG sent a mailing to more than 900 businesses in Westford and worked with the Greater Lowell and Nashoba Valley Chambers of Commerce to inform businesses of the Westford Business Forum. The purpose of this meeting was to hear directly from business owners regarding their impressions of doing business in the community. The Westford Business Forum was structured to provide an overview of the Westford Comprehensive Master Plan process, describe the economic development section of the plan, and illustrate how it ties in with NMCOG's regional economic development planning process under the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis enabled representatives of the business community to express their ideas, concerns, suggestions, and recommendations within a familiar framework.

Strengths

- Highway access
- Level tax rate/ single tax rate
- Good residential and business location
- Highly educated workforce
- Population sufficient to support diverse businesses
- Wealth of population
- Reasonable cost of living compared to inner - Boston and other high tech corridors
- Lower commercial rents compared to Route128 area.
- Quality of life

Weaknesses

- Loss of character
- Zoning is not flexible – doesn't allow for traditional/colonial style development and is complicated
- Prior Master Plans weren't implemented
- Multitude of "Master Plans" make policy direction and permitting difficult
- Retention of planning/permitting staff
- Site Plan Review takes too long
- Lack of outreach to the business community on the part of the Selectmen and Planning Board
 - important in a global economy
- Loss of technology businesses
- State isn't pro-business
- Building permit cap limits housing development
 - causal relationship with 40Bs

- most 40Bs on small lots in residential neighborhoods
 - encouraged by town 40B design guidelines
- Impacts of inexperienced staff in advertising public meetings, completing peer reviews, etc.
- Attempt to regulate aesthetics
- Requirement of monetary gift as condition of permits (discourages Mom & Pop type businesses)
- Need for pedestrian amenities impacts traffic operation
- Lack of sewer and other infrastructure
- No business identity – the establishment of a Chamber of Commerce or Partnership with business community was recommended in the 1995 Master Plan
- Lack of a coordinated permitting process
- Lack of training/education of volunteer and elected boards/committees

Opportunities

- Examine zoning requirements for continuity/common vision
- Clear and comprehensive bylaws that provide certainty for land owners
- Investigate traffic improvements along Route 110/Develop a Long Term Plan
 - Provide more lane capacity and pedestrian accommodations
- Examine Route 40 in terms of future development (particularly 110 acres near Route 3)
- Create a forum for Businesses
- Identify a person to serve as the town's Economic Development contact
- Redevelopment of vacant mills for specialty retail and neighborhood commercial businesses

Threats

- Businesses leaving/no replacement of similar quality
- Competing with other communities that offer better business resources
- Negative attitude of town's people toward business
- Continuous change to regulations (signs and vernal pools)
- Lack of tax incentives and economic incentives
- Length of permitting process
- Lack of outreach to businesses
- Lack of effort to retain existing businesses (particularly high tech)
- Public perception concerning convenience of services vs. growth policy

As a final question, participants in the Westford Business Form were asked: what can the Town of Westford do within its Master Plan to ensure future support for the business community? The responses to this question varied from providing more financial and technical support to the planning staff and boards, to changing the way the town does business in relating to the business community, establishing a Zoning Bylaw Review Committee and stronger Master Plan Implementation Committee, and promoting the location of businesses to be supported by local residents. Among the many recommendations made, the following list of ideas was submitted:

Needs & Wants

- Spend money on professional planning staff/retain planning staff
- Treat applicants in a professional manner
- Changes in regulations shouldn't always be more restrictive
- Establish Zoning Bylaw Review Committee
- Provide adequate time for healthy review of zoning bylaw changes by the community
- Establish unifying vision/motto; provide information on businesses and locations
- Town leaders need to educate community relative to the importance of business
- Promote convenience/contribution in taxes and employment opportunities
- Create a stronger Master Plan Implementation Committee